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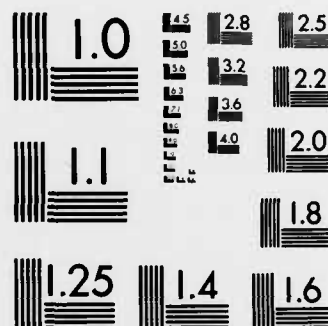
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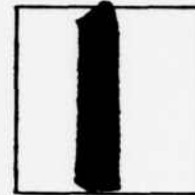
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NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, R.I.

THE MILITARY AND MORAL IMPLICATIONS
OF THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR

by

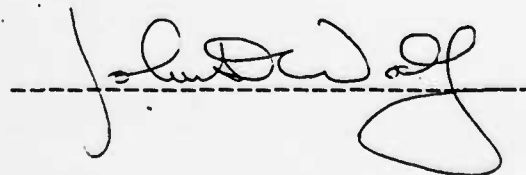
John D. Wolf

Major, U.S. Air Force

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College
as an entry in the Past Presidents Prize Essay Contest.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and
are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the
Department of the Navy.

13 May 1983

A handwritten signature, likely "John D. Wolf", is written over a horizontal dashed line.

ABSTRACT

Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War is a useful source of insight on both the proper conduct of war and the impact war can have on society. The Athenians demonstrated the dangers of failing to act decisively in war. Rather than pursuing a strategy directed at an achievable victory, they took an indirect approach that gave them an exhausting protracted war. Their tactics also reflected a lack of decision that lost them key battles. The negative impact that war can have on men's moral character is illustrated by the changes that took place in Athenian society. Pericles' funeral oration gives an account of the values Athenians lived by before the war. The requirements of combat forced the rejection of these higher principles in favor of more basic values keyed to survival. Athenian society itself suffered a deterioration as moral restraints became loose and public spirit gave way to self-involvement.

The Peloponnesian War took place 25 centuries ago, involved a relatively small number of troops, and had only a minor impact on the course of Western civilization. Why should we read its history today? Two very good reasons come to mind. First, Thucydides' history is a remarkable account, not only for accurately preserving the events, but for portraying the war at a human level that shows us how similar modern man is to our predecessors. The emotions and motivations of these Greeks are totally familiar to the modern reader, the human element apparently a constant in any era. This could be any war in any century.

Second, the very familiarity of these Greeks makes this war pertinent to the student of modern warfare. As it reveals the essence of man at war, it says something to us about how wars are won or lost. Read Thucydides with war (not history) as the subject, and important implications can be distilled on war's nature. Of the many insights offered by Thucydides, I consider the key points to be the dangers of indecision in war, and the negative affect war can have on the moral character of a society.

The central implication of this history for military conduct is indeed relevant to any war: the lack of decisiveness can be fatal. Thucydides wrote of failure; Athens lost the war to Sparta. Why? The reasons portrayed in this history--political blunders, poor timing, shifting alliances, tactical failures, plague, and plain bad luck--if boiled down to find their essence, reveal a damning lack of forthright, decisive action by Athens.

More specifically, Athens failed to act decisively at two levels crucial to military success: in formulating (and following) an intelligent strategy, and in executing military operations themselves.

On the strategic level, Athens' core problem was a failure to pursue strategic goals that would reasonably lead to victory. The military strategy outlined by Pericles was so indirect that it virtually guaranteed an exhausting, protracted war. Once Pericles died, even these indirect goals were abandoned, and no suitable substitute objectives were found.

The strength of Pericles' strategy was that it made good use of Athens' relative advantages. The Athenian navy was second to none, and Pericles hoped to make the war with Sparta a naval contest. Athens' commercial power was relied on to provide the capital for a long war that would drain the capital-poor Spartans. Athens was to avoid direct confrontation on land, attack Spartan possessions from the sea, and count on the exhaustion of the Spartan treasury to bring the war to an end.

Yet the war was lost, and in part the loss can be attributed to Pericles' confidence in indirect methods. Direct invasion of Peloponnese may have been impractical because of Athens' inferiority in land forces. However, no decisive blow with a concentration of sea forces was apparently ever achieved, either. The strategy called for fighting but not winning the war.

The problem was compounded by Athens' seeming abandonment of any concrete strategic goals once Pericles died of the plague in

the second year of the war. Had he lived, he might have eventually capitalized on Athens' naval superiority to achieve some important victory. With Pericles gone, Athens drifted through fifteen years of war without identifiable strategic objectives. The series of land clashes had no discernible pattern and little cumulative result. The one memorable victory, far from being the result of decisive strategy, followed a landing of Athenians at Pylos that was accidental!

This lack of direction is most vividly illustrated in the decision to mount a campaign against Sicily. This was Athens' greatest expedition, and, according to Thucydides, consisted of "the most costly and splendid Greek force that had ever been sent out by a single city up to that time." Why did Athens go to such great trouble and expense to invade Sicily? Thucydides gives many reasons, none of them good. The Athenians went at the request of allies, but were influenced "in particular [by] the large amount of money reported to be in the temples and the treasury" of Sicilian cities. They were persuaded to invade by Alcibiades, who "hoped to reduce Sicily...and personally gain in wealth and reputation by means of his successes." Athens spent heavily and sailed away to Sicily, where they lost the battle that cost them the war.

The question the Athenians apparently failed to ask themselves is, what if they had won? How would the subjugation of Sicily have contributed to the war effort? An Athenian victory in Sicily would have been meaningless if the major strategic

goal was defeat of the Spartans. As for many nations in many eras, Athens inability to make clear to itself its strategic objectives, and to decisively pursue them, led to inconclusive action and expensive failure.

As at the strategic level, Athens' lack of decisiveness was evident at the operational level, that is, in the execution of military operations. Indecisive execution cost Athens key battles, and wars cannot be won without victory in battle. The Sicilian campaign also provides an excellent example of Athens' operational failures. If Thucydides' awed description of the Athenian invasion force was accurate, Athens should have won. The reasons for their loss--timing, blunder, poor planning, confusion--again have the common thread of indecisiveness in the conduct of the campaign.

First of all, the attack plan called for an indirect approach rather than a direct attack on Syracuse, the main city on Sicily. The invasion force visited other cities on Sicily first to rally support for Athens, and then cruised along the coast in a display of power, but avoided combat. For the Syracusans, "from the moment when the Athenians failed to attack them instantly, as they first feared and expected, every day that passed did something to revive their courage." Since the Athenians met with little success in gaining allies elsewhere on the island, their choice of plans was not the best start for the campaign.

Second, once Athens finally engaged and beat a Syracusan army, they failed to press their advantage with further action.

The victory was not followed up and the momentum established was allowed to dissipate. With winter approaching, the generals were afraid to go on without reinforcements from Athens. Victory was followed by withdrawal from the area, and Syracuse was given time to reorganize, take heart, and send to Sparta for help. When the Athenians later returned to Syracuse, they fell back immediately on indirect siege tactics rather than seek a decisive confrontation. The time consumed in this approach permitted the arrival of a major Spartan force.

Throughout this campaign, Athens failed to press its greatest advantage--a clear naval superiority. The fleet never served in a decisive battle. Its main function seemed to be demonstration of strength, a demonstration which convinced the Syracusans of the need for a large Spartan fleet on the scene, which they got. Athens allowed its great fleet to ride at anchor in Syracuse harbor during much of the campaign, a tactic which led to the trapping of the fleet there once the Spartans arrived. The only major naval clash was the unsuccessful attempt of the fleet to break out of this trap. This proved decisive, but not in Athens' favor.

Perhaps the most costly misstep was the inability of Athens to decide to withdraw from Sicily at the right moment. When the situation turned doubtful, Nicias, the commanding general, wrote home for instructions rather than decide for himself. When a new general arrived with reinforcements, he at least proposed offensive action to decide the issue; "he would either succeed and

take Syracuse, or would take the expedition home, instead of frittering away the lives of the Athenians." Decisive! Good! Well, they lost, but they did not go home. Nicias "was unwilling to admit their weakness," and feared the condemnation of Athens for failure more than he feared "a soldier's death at the hands of the enemy" if he stayed. Unfortunately, this meant that the whole Athenian army stayed, too. By the time Nicias became convinced of the futility of staying on, more Spartan reinforcements had arrived, and Athens' fate was sealed. Athens' desperate attempt to withdraw by land ended in the utter destruction of the once-great Athenian invasion force.

Thucydides' history also provides a vivid and timeless illustration of the affect war has on the moral character of men and nations. The picture is clear: war can have a profound negative impact on a society's values. From Pericles' funeral oration, given early in the war, we learn of the basic values of pre-war Athenian society. The values he described are, in fact, very similar to our own. The remaining history shows the war forcing Athens to abandon these principles and adopt new values in order to survive. The necessities of combat called for brutal action; Athens responded. As the war dragged on, the moral restraints on society itself became so loose that Athens eventually bore little resemblance to Athens at peace.

If Pericles' description of Athens was accurate, the core values of pre-war Athenian society had much in common with

American values. His speech honoring the soldiers who fell in the first year of the war contained a lengthy review of the Athenian character. In this discussion, Pericles saw the Athenians as having no equals in "independence of spirit." They were "men with courage, with knowledge of their duty, and with a sense of honour in action." Public life was regulated "strictly within the control of law," and their laws were intended to "secure equal justice for all." The government itself was a "democracy in the hands not of the few but of the many." In relations with other states, Pericles' Athens was a reliable ally, "firm in [its] attachments." Its alliance system was based on good works rather than conquest: "we secure our friends not by accepting favours but by doing them." Pericles saw Athens as unique in this regard. "We are alone among mankind in doing men benefits, not on calculations of self-interest, but in the fearless confidence of freedom." These ideals are all easily understood by Americans.

Once in the war with Sparta, however, the values of Athens were changed. The newly expressed values, wartime values, bear little resemblance to those of Pericles' oration. In many cases, the principles that were previously held in respect were now specifically renounced.

A new, wartime guiding principle was survival, which was repeatedly linked with maintenance of the empire. Athens now saw itself as vitally dependent on keeping hold of its possessions. Alcibiades spoke plainly: "if we cease to rule others, we are in

danger of being ruled ourselves." Cleon later advised harsh treatment of a rebellious Lesbos because, "if, right or wrong, you determine to rule, you must...punish as your interest requires, or else you must give up your empire." Even Pericles, now describing Athens' empire as a despotism, counseled maintenance at all costs: "perhaps it was wrong to take it, but to let it go is unsafe."

The right to defend the empire was supported by another concept to which the Athenians now frequently referred: the "natural" rule of the strong over the weak. The empire must be maintained by force, but is the use of force not a natural act? "Men, by a natural law, always rule where they are stronger. We did not make that law...we found it existing, and it will exist for ever." This rationale, repeated many times by Thucydides, was not unique in history. It was only uncommon for the Greeks to be so candid about it as a motive.

The "naturalness" of Athenian domination received further support from two motives that became elevated to the rank of virtues: fear and self-interest. This first virtue now justified not only the preservation of the empire but its expansion. "Fear makes us hold our empire in Greece, and fear makes us now come...to secure our position in Sicily," the Syracusans were told. Self-interest was presented as a plausible and compelling justification for nearly any act. "No one can quarrel with a people for making, in matters of tremendous risk, the best

provision that it can for its interest." In a war, the opportunities for questioning the virtues of a particular interest are reduced.

Previous values not pertinent to the wartime environment were now held up for ridicule. Pity and sentiment were described as "failings most fatal to empire." Justice must become subordinate to expediency and self-interest. Moderation was derided as likely to bring "condemnation instead of approval" from subordinate states. Even honor was denigrated by the Athenians as they warned Melos: "do not fall back on the idea of honour, which has been the ruin of so many when danger and disgrace were staring them in the face."

The actions of Athens in the war reflected this new value system. Previous expressions of respect for independence did not enter the equation when Athens approached a neutral Melos. Questions of empire and force were the key issues; Melos was seized and the resisters executed. Sicily was invaded by a large Athenian force, not "in the fearless confidence of freedom," but because of the need to expand the empire and the amount of treasure that might be looted from Sicilian temples. Self-interest, fear and calculations of strength dominated combat decisions, and expediency was paramount. As the Athenians freely admitted, "nothing is unreasonable if expedient."

The requirements of combat, not previously held values, now set the moral tone. Cities under siege were starved. Revolutionary elements were liquidated. Large groups of captured

prisoners were executed in revenge for acts of savagery by the enemy. Mercenaries employed by Athens lay waste to towns not involved in the combat, killing all inhabitants. As in any war, combat meant brutality.

Athens likely anticipated these features of war. Did they also foresee the extent to which the war would damage the integrity of their society? Athens suffered grave damage to its social cohesion as well as losses due to combat. The morals which guided Athenians in actions among themselves were also changed by the war.

Thucydides vividly described the changes which took place within the city of Athens as a result of the repeated invasion of their territory and the plague which swept the population. With death and suffering all around, "no one was eager to persevere in the ideals of honour...present enjoyment, and all that contributed to it, was accepted as both honourable and useful. Fear of gods or law of man were no restraint." Within society, the loss of a reliable future loosened the hold of moral principles, and only self-satisfaction was left.

Thucydides' account of Corcyra, Athens' ally, takes this moral deterioration of society one step further. Corcyra was a society in revolution, so that the dominating personal motives were not only directed at self-satisfaction but at achievement of satisfaction by murdering one's personal enemies. Thucydides gave "private hatred, love of power due to ambition and greed, pleasure in revenge" as the chief causes for action. Normal

values became completely reversed. "Moderation was the pretext of the unmanly, rashness was held the mark of a man...revenge was more prized than self-preservation." Murder became common, and excess the rule. All the worst features of war were manifest in the struggle within the society of one city. Athens did not become a Corcyra. However, in discussing Corcyra, Thucydides summed up the potential affects of war on any people. "In peace and prosperity states and individuals are governed by higher ideals because they are not involved in necessities beyond their control, but war deprives them of their easy existence and is a rough teacher that brings men's dispositions down to the level of their circumstances."

Of course, Thucydides' work cannot be universally applied to contemporary situations. America did not lose World War II by failing to bomb Berlin straight away, nor did our society collapse in the course of a long world war. Yet, Thucydides' war cannot be ignored any more than Clausewitz' nineteenth-century military writings can. History may not be predictive, but it still has meaning. Thucydides recognized the constancy of the human quotient, and saw his work as an "everlasting possession." If we read his account of war's pitfalls and influences as it was intended, we can use it as an important source of "knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future."

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